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British Reviews of Shikasta

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Two New Novels by Lessing: *Shikasta* and *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*

Review

by Jean Pickering

Doris Lessing. *Canopus in Argos: Archives. Re: Colonised Planet 5 Shikasta*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979. \$10.95.

Doris Lessing. *Canopus in Argos: Archives. The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. \$10.00.

Fearing as we did that her long silence would lengthen into permanence, Lessing's readers were overjoyed to hear that she was writing again. Most of us are personally as well as professionally indebted to her since we feel our private lives enriched by her perceptions. Long before I became an academic, I discovered her work by chance, picking up a copy of *A Proper Marriage* when my child was a few months old. It seemed to me then an accurate, humorous, sympathetic portrait, and I valued it for the insights it gave me into my own situation.

This personal reaction was repeated as each successive novel appeared. Whenever I opened a new volume, uppermost in my mind was the question Lessing herself prescribed: "What does this say about my life?" And always there was something. The keenness of observation, the rationality of inference, the courage in pursuing unpopular trains of thought—all these attributes helped me define and extend my world.

Consequently I am puzzled and disturbed by her two latest novels. An informal poll of my colleagues and a hurried scan of the book review columns indicates that this reaction is not peculiar to me. Lessing's readers, by and large, have been attracted by her allegiance to nineteenth century realism, with which she so attractively claimed kinship in "A Small Personal Voice." We minimized suggestions of impending apocalypse; as Virginia Tiger pointed out in her review of Lessing's *Stories*, "I'm surprised we didn't notice the cranky religious vision she was developing."

We didn't notice because our delight in what Elaine Showalter calls "her extraordinary barometric sensitivity to the social climate" diverted us from any discordant element; further, we tended to interpret as metaphor what I now suspect Lessing intended as prophecy. How, if not metaphoric, could *Memoirs of a Survivor* be "an attempt at autobiography"? Lessing herself encouraged such a way of reading in *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*, where Charles Watkins' journey is plainly inward, the healing pilgrimage of a madman. But somewhere along the way Lessing's metaphorical picture of how things are seems to have evolved into a picture of how things will be. In fact, perceiving Lessing as a prophet explains a lot of the difficulties that have for years embarrassed her admirers—

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British Reviews of *Shikasta*

by Nancy Topping Bazin

British reviewers had mixed reactions to *Shikasta*, the first novel in Doris Lessing's new series, "Canopus in Argos: Archives." Favorable and critical comments balanced one another, often within the same review. Furthermore, reactions tended to be extreme: either it was a "magnificent" novel (*Times* 11/15/79) or reading it was "a shameful waste of precious and irreplaceable time" (*Sun. Telegraph* 11/18/79); or it was simultaneously great and boring. In general, British reviews of *Shikasta* were more perceptive than those of the second novel in Lessing's new series, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*. Because *Shikasta* has little plot and requires unusual concentration, perhaps its reviewers were forced to read more carefully than those of *Marriages* (which is, in my opinion, the most delightful and readable of Lessing's novels). Whatever the explanation, I think many of the main issues that Lessing scholars will discuss during the next few years are posited by these reviews. Furthermore, I predict that the superlatives used to praise *Shikasta* in these reviews will accurately represent the awe and enthusiasm of future readers.

Reasons for negative reactions to *Shikasta* varied. In the *New Statesman* (11/79), David Lodge expressed dissatisfaction with "the basic fable: the benevolent supervision of Earth by Canopus, 'working at its plans of rescue and reform' through its high-minded, selfless agents." In his opinion, this fable raises "unresolved ideological and metaphysical questions." For example, "if Canopus 'colonised' our Earth, it cannot be immune from Doris Lessing's own critique of Western imperialism; and it must bear some responsibility for our woes since it started our history off. This responsibility is never acknowledged." Lodge, therefore, calls her fable "sentimental," because it "offers only a palliative for, not an answer to, the perennial problems of evil, suffering and individual death." Writing of *Shikasta* in *TLS* (11/23/79), Anthony Burgess objects to Lessing's new "fanciful cosmic viewpoint" for similar reasons: "The agonies of human life are, God knows, real enough, but to posit cosmic actiologies and galactic cures is an evasion of reality as well as a mockery of terrestrial suffering."

Likewise, in *The Listener* (11/22/79), Hyam Maccoby notes Lessing's use of the Old Testament and declares her vision "morally inferior." He prefers the Old Testament where the struggle between good and evil is not "cosmic" but rather "within the heart of the individual man, who can win it without outside interference." He also prefers Lessing the novelist to Lessing the prophet: "It is not that I object to her working on a vast canvas and a cosmic scale. But she

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rigorous, she has always had a sharp eye for the kinds of people and situations we meet in daily life. Now it seems she has lost her interest in them. Perhaps her change in posture is caused by despair in the capability of the human race to save itself from the disaster she has been foretelling for the last decade. These two novels suggest that salvation must come from without; we can be saved only by the intervention of superior beings. In short, she has converted to a religious world view. She may well be in the forefront of a general movement, as she has been of so many others. It is commonly observed that all around us people are being reborn at a terrifying rate. Perhaps we are on the verge of another Great Awakening, and those of us whose gaze is firmly fixed on this world will again be under siege. But we do not take it kindly, or even gracefully, when we see our leader marching in the vanguard of the aliens.

Jean Pickering, West Coast editor of the *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, is professor of English at California State University, Fresno; her essay, "Marxism and Madness: The Two Faces of Doris Lessing's Myth," appeared in the special Lessing issue of *MFS* (1980), and she is working on a book on contemporary British women writers.

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does so by adopting a philosophy that dwarfs the individual, and this must be the death of the aims of the novel." Maccoby finds it difficult "to be interested in these manipulated lives . . . overseen by the detached moral engineers of Canopus," and he, therefore, hopes she will return to her "proper work as the chronicler of human lives in a human setting." Remembering "her masterpiece," *The Golden Notebook*, John Braine in the *Sunday Telegraph* (11/18/79) concurs with this last remark.

Furthermore, Rachel Billington (*Financial Times* (1/5/80) points out the problem in "this sort of book" of "holding your reader's attention": "It is no accident that documents and reports have a bad reputation for readability. Nor are baldly stated theories of mankind's degeneracy very digestible. Particularly if your taste-buds are prepared for a novel." In an Edinburgh paper, *The Scotsman* (12/15/79), reviewer Allan Massie observes that the novel's "central weakness" is obvious in its full title: *Re: Colonised Planet 5 Shikasta: Personal, Psychological, Historical Documents Relating to Visit by JOHOR* (George Sherban) *EMISSARY* (Grade 9) 87th Period of the Last Days. Massie says, "It rests of course in the use of language." He points out that "bureaucratic language is dead language, and however skillful Ms. Lessing's parody (and it is fair to say of course that she employs a variety of modes, and that certain descriptive passages rise to heights of rhetoric) this unimaginative use of language stultifies whole areas of the novel."

Elizabeth Berridge in the *Daily Telegraph* (12/6/79) charges that *Shikasta* is "overweighted . . . with case histories," and Bernard Levin in the *Sunday Times* (11/18/79) complains that after page 74 Lessing forgets she is writing a novel: "In scores upon scores of pages Mrs.

Lessing drones on, denouncing in familiar banalities man's greed, exploitation and cruelty." He concludes, "The book, to be sure, is worthy enough. But what has worthiness to do with art."

In a review in *The Birmingham Post* (11/15/79), Jean Richardson regrets that a "fine writer" like Lessing has been "swallowed up by a passionate, partial protester"; moreover, she charges that Lessing's "diagnosis of evil" is "biased": "The argument is one-sided, because for Doris Lessing colonialism and Christianity are to blame for defiling the paradise of the primitive peoples." Although Richardson admits there is some truth in Lessing's analysis, she blames her for ignoring "the great achievements of Western civilisation." Distorting the truth in her own way, Richardson concludes, "Doris Lessing does not really like human beings."

In the December *London Review of Books*, Robert Taubman has a different criticism. He finds Lessing's myth-making "unpersuasive," claiming that her "mythic structures . . . require a credulousness beyond anything expected in the old religions." He claims she is "vague on the lost values of the past ('voluntary submission to the great Whole') and both vague and cranky on the continuing bond between earth and Canopus through the intermittent flow of SOWF ('Substance-of-we-feeling')." Furthermore, he feels the "signals" he received about George Sherban "are so confused that he's no help, in 'those dreadful last days,' in telling right from wrong."

Raising yet another issue, W. L. Webb rightly comments in the *Guardian* (11/15/79): "some of the sisters will not fail to note that the superior visitants treated so deferentially are all men. Wise Men"; and Roz Kaveney writes in the December 1979 *Books and Bookmen*: "It is perhaps surprising how comparatively perfunctory is her treatment in this novel of sexual politics; we are told that it was not thus in the beginning but it is only implied in passing that the subjection of women is part of the disorder on which Shammat feeds."

However, like a number of other reviewers, Roz Kaveney also has high praise for *Shikasta*: "this extraordinarily ambitious book achieves real grandeur despite attacks of silliness," and again, "with all one's reservations—the book is sometimes cranky and boring and over long—it must be stated that *Shikasta* is an undeniably impressive achievement." Kaveney finds the "fantastic elements . . . particularly magnificent," claims "Lessing has rarely written as well" as in the short case studies, and insists the book "is full of deeply moving scenes and of characters, often sketched in a line or two, who both stay in the mind as individuals and serve the thrust of the arguments"; she praises especially the sections by Rachel on Sherban's youth. Kaveney notes that although "the form of the novel is sometimes irritating," it "generally serves as a useful distancing device for the awesome concepts which flicker past." Her review predicts that the "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series "will prove one of Lessing's finest achievements."

Likewise, despite Rachel Billington's criticisms, she

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says *Shikasta* "has much to say about the human (or Shikastan) race which is profound, relevant, and daring." Calling Lessing's cosmic fancies "mere decoration," Anthony Burgess declares that "the virtue of Mrs. Lessing's novel lies in its rage and its hope and, of course, its humanity." Despite Allan Massie's reservation about Lessing's use of bureaucratic language, he too senses the greatness of her achievement: he calls *Shikasta* "rich and provocative" and notes that "beside it, other things look fairly pale." He says she "has constructed a satisfying and coherent reworking of old myth, couched in new scientific terms." Looking at the novel as a whole, he states: "There are moments of extraordinary and audacious beauty, there is a genuine excitement in the great sweep of the book and one cannot fail to admire Ms. Lessing's intellectual grasp of her material."

In the *Spectator* (1/12/80) Alex de Jonge complains that Lessing's "strongly unified conception" fails to "come across on the narrative level"; yet overall he finds *Shikasta* "a highly imaginative and powerful piece of myth making." Reviewing for *Gay News* (11/17/79), Marsaili Cameron praises Lessing's "ability to juxtapose telling detail and visions of eternity." David Lodge's final statement about *Shikasta* in his *New Statesman* review might have been written about most of Lessing's novels: "But whether you like it or not, it certainly makes you think; and there are too few works of fiction around of which that can be said, not to be grateful." Jonathan Keates comments in *The Literary Review* (2/9-22/80): "she has had the courage, almost nonexistent among contemporary novelists, to underline the perpetual combat of good and evil, of the mindless or insensitive versus discriminating intelligence and active sympathy." He emphasizes that "*Shikasta* is not in fact a work of science fiction but a religious discourse, a prolonged, intricate parable." In the *Times* (11/15/79) Myrna Blumberg calls *Shikasta* "magnificent," "an astounding book that sets out to chronicle the whole works: the whole world of humanity, spirit, earth, stars, soul, resources, virtue, evil, pre-Eden, forever." Edward Campbell in the *Evening News* (11/26/79) calls *Shikasta* "truly astonishing" and describes it as "a novel with an undoubtedly subliminal effect." Campbell writes: "Doris Lessing—and this is where it gets eerie—somehow manages to suggest inside information. You feel she has had a glimpse of something outside imagination. If the something isn't instantly convincing, neither is it trivial or absurd." Perhaps the most surprising remark in the reviews is one by Lucille Redmond on a program entitled "Bookweek" for RTE Radio 1 (2/24/80). Redmond said, "I've never liked Doris Lessing's work before, always found it too talky and self-important, but *Shikasta* is fun to read."

The British reviews raise questions such as these, which scholars will be trying to answer: Does Lessing's science fiction format reduce free choice beyond what is acceptable? Does her use of archive material destroy the particularity essential to retaining our interest in the novel? Is the language of reports and letters a burden the novel

cannot bear? Has Lessing crossed too far over the line that separates creative writing from essay writing or dramatic presentation from didactic prose? Has her despair at the prospect of a catastrophe and her loss of faith in human beings' ability to change made her blind to more positive developments? Is her Sufi concept of evolution giving her a false hope for the far distant future, and does this belief in our ultimate powerlessness encourage political apathy and the psychological paralysis that accompanies despair? By largely ignoring contemporary feminism, its revolutionary impact, and the hope it provides, is Lessing creating a serious blind spot in her vision? Whatever reservations one might hold about *Shikasta*, is it nevertheless the novel that presents most brilliantly and comprehensively Lessing's world view? As scholars become more familiar with this provocative work, they will spark new questions, but they will also be responding to the issues raised in these British reviews.

British Reviews of *Marriages*

by Nancy Topping Bazin

British reviews of Doris Lessing's second novel in her "Canopus in Argos: Archives" series, *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four, and Five*, were more favorable than those of the first novel, *Shikasta*. However, compared with comments about *Shikasta*, both negative and positive remarks about *Marriages* were less perceptive and more often blatantly inaccurate, perhaps because a novel dealing with male-female relationships draws forth in reviewers and other readers the multitude of misconceptions and prejudices that abound on this topic. Moreover, although reviewers obviously enjoyed reading *Marriages* more than they did *Shikasta*, their praise lacked the intensity and enthusiasm that characterized the praise of the first book. This could suggest that although *Marriages* is a better novel, it is not necessarily a greater one.

Among the least enlightening reviews of *Marriages* is Elizabeth Harvey's in *The Birmingham Post* (5/24/80). She complains: "Things happen, but there is a curious lack of drama and opaqueness, and the story is further complicated by the sudden appearances of the chroniclers who are reconstructing the facts from the old tales and pictures which glamourised them." Harvey's sympathies were with Ben Ata for having to marry the Queen of Zone Five; she does not even mention sympathizing with Alth, the lonely outcast struggling to enter Zone Two! Writing for the *Sunday Telegraph* (5/8/80), Thomas Hinde finds "the core of message in this tale of kings and queens, soldiers and wise women, too slender" and, while admitting "a lot of it is lovely," adds rather snidely, "but I'm sure Miss Lessing's many admirers will enjoy every quaint and lovely syllable." He claims "Miss Lessing's real problem is that although she can conceive of a reconciliation between male and female values she cannot bring enthusiasm to the idea." A reviewer for *The Yorkshire Post*, Philip Thody, does not like

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